



*Anatomia del corpo humano
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JOYCE AS A MORAL ANATOMIST

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Joyce as a Moral Anatomist

The cover illustration for Richard Joyce's elegant and powerful recent work, *The Evolution of Morality*, is a reproduction of an oddly fascinating and disturbing sixteenth-century engraving, the *Anatomia del corpo humano*. One has to examine the image for a minute to realize that the standing human figure, stripped of skin, and with muscles, tendons and joints revealed, holds the anatomist's knife in his left hand and that, with his right, he holds up the single piece of skin, from bearded face to dangling extremities, that had once covered his body. This is the anatomist self-flayed, revealed to inspection by his own knife. A double worry is suggested: the body without the skin may have surprising, or disquieting, features. There is no assurance that what is revealed will accord with our preconceptions. Additionally, there is the thought that only the artist's magic, freezing a moment in time, permits the body to maintain its integrity. In reality, the body of the self-flayer would collapse and die in short order.

Richard Joyce similarly undertakes to wield the analytic knife of science and philosophy to cut away the surface appearance of the moral sense and see what lies beneath. Again, what we find may be surprising or disquieting. Beneath the surface, we find the once-hidden articulation of the moral sensibility. We see its parts, how they are connected, how one links to another. And we may also suspect or fear that what remains cannot long stand inspection in such a state. It may be, indeed, that "we murder to dissect." And if so, then like the self-flayer, we are ourselves the victims.

Perhaps, though, the analogy is imperfect. In some respects, it certainly is. The self-flayer may die *to* be inspected but not *from* being inspected. What he dies from is having a vital part cut away. Were that not so, the inspection might yield surprises but need not show any defect in underlying functionality.

Joyce's Project

So, *can* the moral sensibility withstand scrutiny? The only test is to scrutinize and see. Where to begin? We can start with the point that we are moral beings in a sense needing fuller specification. It is also a sense in which most or all other animals are not moral beings. That suggests that we are dealing with a question about human nature, about what makes us different in this way from most other animals. One approach, which Richard Joyce adopts and commends, is to consider our evolutionary background. If we are different, what has made us so? The questions of what we are talking about by referring to ourselves as moral beings and of why appeal to evolutionary considerations is promising both deserve fuller exploration.

What range of phenomena is under consideration? First, there is a linguistically and socially identified class of moral emotions, motivations and judgments. Second, moral judgments embody or make reference to standards against which actual behavior can be measured. Third, we make, recognize and respond to moral judgments, engage in discussion about them and base decision and action upon the outcome of such discussion. Fourth, we are typically to some degree motivated to act in accordance with those moral judgments we accept or endorse, though the motivation is not always, and cynics may suspect not often, sufficient to effect compliance. Fifth, moral judgments typically have as their subject matter questions about cooperation and conflict between human beings, about benefits, harms and wellbeing, and especially about the ways in which the actions of some may affect others. More particularly, the standards often enjoin helping or promoting the well-being of others and enjoin against causing harm. As a roughly defined territory for investigation, we can call these facts the *moral phenomena*.

Where shall we look for answers? How are we to understand the moral phenomena? A good place to start, suggests Joyce, is evolutionary psychology. If we are moral beings in a sense that most other animals are not, then why? What are the relevant evolved capacities of the

human mind, and what kind of evolutionary pressure shaped our minds to think and respond morally, but not those of other animals? The approach, of course, is controversial, and some would predict little illumination from this quarter. If they are right, we will have to look elsewhere, but that does not make it a bad place to start—only a bad place to stop should the investigation prove unfruitful.

Joyce investigates the moral phenomena by focusing upon the human capacity for moral judgment. The investigation falls into two major phases with some interpenetration. The first investigates the scientific question of how the moral phenomena, including the capacity for moral judgment, originated and came to play the role they do in our lives, while the second phase philosophically assesses the results of the first. After surveying the first phase, I shall examine the central line of argument of the second phase. In brief, Joyce's conclusion is that evolutionary or naturalistic accounts of the moral phenomena are likely to undermine, rather than vindicate or reinforce, any kind of prescriptive ethics. There will be a scientifically plausible story of the evolution *of* morality—that is, of how it came about that we are creatures who make and are moved by moral judgments—but the *explanatory* story will leave little room for *normative* confidence. Instead, we are epistemically justified in moral agnosticism, neither accepting nor denying the existence of moral truths.

The Evolutionary Anatomy of Morals

Joyce begins with the point that helping behavior can be evolutionarily adaptive. Obviously, it is possible in principle for the benefits of being helped to exceed the costs borne by a helper. A food-sharer may save a life at modest cost to himself. But that is not enough to show that such behavior can be expected to evolve. Though the helper may not be as badly off for helping as the beneficiary would be without help, the helper must compete for resources and

reproductive opportunities with non-helpers. Why, then, should we not expect helpers to lose out in competition with non-helpers—and thus, in the fullness of evolutionary time, to drive themselves to extinction? The short answer is that under certain conditions, helping can improve the reproductive success of helpers.¹

This is not the place for extensive discussion, but there are several reasonably well-understood mechanisms. These include mutualism, kin-selection, reciprocity, both direct and indirect, sexual selection, and perhaps group selection.² At most, however, the availability of such mechanisms contributes to showing that various kinds of helping or pro-social behavior can be favored by evolution. Joyce recognizes that this is not enough. It may provide necessary motivational and behavioral underpinnings, but those are present in many other social animals. Joyce focuses upon the capacity for moral judgment, which seems absent in other animals. His hypothesis, roughly stated, is that, given the potential adaptive advantages of some kinds of helping behavior, helping evolved, and morality evolved to regulate helping—to increase the likelihood that it will occur when advantageous.³ Intelligent and social creatures such as

¹ Here and throughout the discussion of the evolution of helping behavior, I shall be assuming that we are speaking of dispositions to help or refrain from doing so, etc., that are in some way under genetic control and thus are the sorts of things that can be favored or disfavored by natural selection.

² Mutualism applies to cases in which creatures cooperate on a project that is advantageous to all who cooperate but which none can carry out alone. In kin-selection, individuals helping close relatives contribute both to the spread of their own genotype and to the spread of the very disposition that leads them to help. In reciprocity, helpers are differentially helped, non-helpers differentially not helped, harmers differentially harmed, and so on. This may be direct or indirect, and indirect reciprocity makes possible such things as reputation and third-party retaliation. In sexual selection, a characteristic which might otherwise be useless to its bearer leads to reproductive success via mate choice by conspecifics. The peacock's tail is the classic example, apparently exaggerated into its present form by a long line of large-tail-preferring peahens. Similarly, if there is a human preference for generosity, altruism and kindness in our mates, then having and exhibiting such traits will be evolutionarily advantageous. Finally, there is group selection. A group composed of altruists, who will contribute cost-justified help to other members, will do better than a non-altruistic group. The problem is that non-helpers may take over, since they get help without giving it. Though there is some controversy, it appears that under certain conditions, the problem can be circumvented, so there is room for group selection as part of the evolutionary account of helping behavior. Joyce discusses the evolution of helping in Chapter 1 (2006, 13-44). Additional important discussion can be found in Sober and Wilson 1998 and in Miller 2000.

³ An account of the evolutionary advantages of helping need not be an account of what motivates helpers. Helpers may, in evolutionary terms, be helping themselves or their descendants, without being in the least motivated by that fact, just as the evolutionary advantage of having sex is the production of offspring, but that may be the furthest thing from the individual's mind.

ourselves gain an evolutionary advantage by classifying acts, responses, and traits of character in moral terms and being motivated accordingly.

How is this possible? Crucial to understanding it, for Joyce, is his identification of *practical clout* as a feature of moral judgments.⁴ Practical clout is comprised of two related features, *inescapability* and *authority*.

We can illustrate by considering a typical moral judgment, that it is wrong to kill an innocent person. Leaving aside the question whether it is true without qualification, we can ask what someone is committed to who accepts it. First, he will not suppose that its application depends on the goals or desires of the person to whom it applies. One who sincerely makes the judgment will not be prepared to withdraw it upon being informed that someone really wants very much to kill an innocent or that such a killing would quite significantly advance his other goals.⁵ Such inescapability is not distinctive of ethics, however; as Philippa Foot pointed out, other imperatives, such as those of etiquette, are equally inescapable.⁶ If etiquette requires eating with a certain utensil, it does not matter how compelling one's reason for not doing so, it remains an offense against etiquette to use a different utensil.

For ethics to be as inescapable as etiquette, *and no more*, seems not to be enough. Foot despaired of finding anything more and suggested that those who sought it “are relying on an illusion, as if trying to give the moral ‘ought’ a magic force.”⁷ If not magic, then what else are we looking for in morality? Joyce suggests *authority*—that it cannot rationally be ignored. You may acknowledge that etiquette applies to you, but rationally ignore it. Other goals or purposes,

⁴ It does not seem that Joyce wants to claim that practical clout is a necessary feature of moral judgments. He allows that some moral judgments might lack clout (or at least one of its components, categoricalness), but doubts that any recognizable moral system will wholly lack clout. (61) It might be best to say that, for Joyce, practical clout is necessarily typical of moral judgments.

⁵ Essentially, this is the same idea that Kant expressed by insisting that moral imperatives were categorical.

⁶ Foot 1978, 162. Joyce cites Foot on this point, (2006, 61-2).

⁷ Foot 1978, 167. To be fair to Foot, she later rejected this conclusion. See, e.g., Foot 2001.

or even relatively trivial wants, may justify dispensing with the norms of etiquette. Not so with moral imperatives. There's something amiss if you acknowledge that the proscription against killing innocents applies to you, but insist that you don't care. In some way, we suppose, whether you *do* care or not, you *ought* to. Moral imperatives have a binding force that cannot be dismissed or shrugged off. Difficult though it is to adequately analyze this authority or bindingness,⁸ it seems to be a real feature of our moral thinking.

Given this, consider human prudence or rather, the lack of it in weakness of will. Though we

are pretty good at calculating long-term benefits, [we] are notoriously poor at getting our motivations in line with the output of these deliberations. Even when it is abundantly clear that the pursuit of short-term gain is going to harm us in the long run, we still find ourselves tempted and succumbing to temptation. We eat junk food, we stay up too late, we grade our students' essays at the last possible moment, we accumulate an assortment of barely used exercise machines in the attic, we procrastinate endlessly on nearly everything. . . . [N]o one could deny that the inability to get one's motivations in line with what one judges to be prudent, the tendency to surrender to instant gratification while trampling the inner voice of practical reason, is a marked feature of human psychology. (Joyce 2006, 110)

Joyce's idea is that it is especially important in the arena of interpersonal relations, where we might help or harm and be helped or harmed, that we not let rationalizing and weakness of will get out of hand. We need a way to put a stop to a process that is, in other contexts, by and large advantageous, "the ability . . . to calculate subjective preferences in a flexible way." (2006, 110) The way is practical clout. In this area, we make judgments about what to do that we take to be immune to re-consideration in the light of our other interests and also immune to being set aside

⁸ Part of the problem is that the sense in which the bindingness of moral imperatives cannot be shrugged off or dismissed must somehow be compatible with the fact that people evidently sometimes do (and therefore can) dismiss or shrug off their moral responsibilities. It must be that (genuine) moral imperatives cannot be dismissed *without fault*, rather that they cannot be dismissed *simpliciter*. But then, to avoid the suspicion of circularity, it appears that the relevant fault will have to be explained in non-moral terms. (And we will face the question why we must care about that kind of fault, whatever it is.)

as lacking authority. It must be admitted, of course, that this ‘conversation-stopper’ does not literally stop all such reconsideration; weakness of will can infect action on moral judgments as well. Nonetheless, practical clout may give us a degree of steadiness and stability in doing what is necessary for long-term individual and social advantage that we would not achieve otherwise.

So, plausibly, we have an evolved aptitude for making moral judgments. We judge that certain behavior, primarily affecting relations to others, is required or prohibited in a way that presupposes practical clout.⁹ This sets the stage for Joyce’s philosophical assessment. If this is what the moral sensibility is, do we have any reason to suppose our moral judgments are *true*?

Moral Agnosticism

Can we be *moral realists*, and especially, *moral naturalists*? Perhaps a definition or two is in order. *Moral realism* is the doctrine that moral claims or judgments are truth-evaluable, that their truth is not relative to perspective or standpoint, and that moral judgments are sometimes true—and presumably non-accidentally so.¹⁰ Even more briefly, there are (non-relative) moral facts, and moral claims may get the moral facts right. *Global naturalism* is the view that everything, or everything knowable, is natural and that the only ways of knowing we have are by way of ordinary modes of inquiry.¹¹ Finally, *moral naturalism* combines moral realism and global naturalism;¹² thus, it supposes that there are moral facts which are or are reducible to natural facts, and which in turn are accessible to ordinary modes of inquiry. There will be no

⁹ If there is something more to morality than this sketch captures, perhaps that is due to cultural variation. Or perhaps a more comprehensive evolutionary account is needed.

¹⁰ At least as a first approximation, I take non-accidental correctness to be sufficient for justification.

¹¹ A fuller account of *ordinary modes of inquiry* would spell out that they include ordinary reasoning, its formally disciplined counterparts in mathematics and logic, scientific and empirical methods and possible future extensions of any or all of these. The account is vague and certainly more would be required in a full analysis, but trying to provide the full analysis is far beyond the scope of this paper.

¹² Technically, one might be a moral naturalist without being a global naturalist, since one might be a naturalist about ethics but not about other things. For simplicity, I note the point here but omit it in the text.

need to appeal to the supernatural or the non-natural, nor to their corresponding epistemological mysteries.

Though Joyce is non-committal on the point, it is a safe bet that he is a global naturalist.¹³ Thus, he assumes that for moral claims to be true or for us to be justified in believing them, moral naturalism must be true, and the moral facts must somehow be identified with natural facts. What are the prospects of such identification? According to Joyce: not good.¹⁴

The basic problem comes with the attempt to naturalize practical clout. We may be able to naturalize some dimension of value, incorporating measures of individual and social well-being. So far as we care about value in this sense, we will have reason to promote it.¹⁵ But moral prescriptions, at least some of them, appear to have practical clout. That is, their application does not depend upon our possibly transient desires, goals or interests, and they have authority over us, so they cannot rationally be ignored.

But it is a familiar fact that at least some reasoning about what to do is sensitive to initial desires or goals. Bert and Ernie, who respectively like beer and wine (and respectively dislike wine and beer), rationally and respectively select . . . beer and wine. Their initial preferences properly influence their final decision. (Joyce 2006, 196) If such sensitivity to desire or preference is sometimes appropriate, then why not always? And if practical reasoning, reasoning about what to do, is always sensitive to initial preferences, goals or desires, what becomes of practical clout? It seems that some agents will be in the position that, without rational fault, they

¹³ Joyce briefly argues against non-naturalism and supernaturalism (2006, 209-211), but moral naturalism is his main target. I set the other discussions aside.

¹⁴ Joyce considers and rebuts common arguments that any such attempt would commit a 'naturalistic fallacy' or would illicitly infer an 'ought' from an 'is.' (2006, 146-156)

¹⁵ Joyce also considers the option of denying that practical clout is really an essential feature of our moral judging. (2006, 193, 199-209) Here, I think the prospects may be better than Joyce does, but I shall not rely upon any such argument. An exploration of a position of this general type, a scalar consequentialism, can be found in Howard-Snyder and Norcross, 1993.

can ignore moral prescriptions. (It will not suffice to point out that they cannot without *moral* fault, for that would be circular in the absence of reason to care about moral fault.)

Joyce surveys the options and finds them unpersuasive. Moreover, he points out that if we cannot naturalize clout, the evolutionary account of our moral sensibility that he has sketched takes on a new importance. Broadly speaking, we have an account of the moral phenomena—of what they are, what features they have, and how they came to have those features—that does not in any way presuppose that there are moral truths for our moral judgments to track. The position that there are moral truths is not thereby ruled out, but it is significantly undermined in that it appears that we have no reason for affirming it. We should be—are rationally justified in being—moral agnostics. We can acknowledge that most people, most of the time, have reason to comply with at least the most central parts of morality. We can expect and hope that this will in general continue. But we should, at least in our theoretical moments, agree that there is nothing that we know to be or are justified in believing to be *really* morally right or morally wrong. Moral rightness and wrongness are, so far as we can tell, properties that we project upon the world rather than discover there.¹⁶

The Unity of Normativity

This is a serious and powerful argument. The resemblance to the self-flaying anatomist is disquieting. Having laid bare the moral sensibility, what remains may be unable to survive. A full answer is more than I can attempt here, but nevertheless, Joyce's conclusions can be undermined. They are not so compelling as they may at first appear. I shall begin by considering an example that begins to shift the burden of proof. Then, I will show that Joyce is

¹⁶ Joyce 2006, 123-133.

committed to something just as mysterious as practical clout. Finally, I will argue that Joyce's own position relies upon and cannot in the end escape the appeal to moral normativity.

If Joyce is right, we have an evolutionary account of the basic features of the human moral sensibility. His arguments suggest that the availability of the evolutionary account casts doubt upon the deliverances of the moral sensibility, namely, moral judgments. But of course the moral sensibility is not all that has evolved—at least, not if evolutionary psychology is broadly on the right track. So consider:

Imagine that someone proposed eliminating the study of mathematics, and replacing it with the systematic study of the biological basis of mathematical thinking. They might argue that, after all, our mathematical beliefs are the products of our brains working in certain ways, and an evolutionary account might explain why we developed the mathematical capacities we have. Thus 'mathobiology' could replace mathematics. Why would this proposal sound so strange? It is not because our mathematical capacities have no biological basis; nor is it because it would not be interesting to know more about that basis. Rather, the proposal is strange because mathematics is an autonomous subject with its own internal standards of proof and discovery. Consider the Fundamental Theorem of Algebra, which we know to be true because of Gauss's proof. 'Mathobiology', if it existed, could add nothing to our understanding of the theorem or the proof. It would be irrelevant to determining whether the proof is valid or invalid, because that is something that can be established only within the framework of mathematics itself. (Rachels, 78-79)

Similarly, we might suggest that ethics is an autonomous discipline with its own internal standards of proof and discovery. The biology of the moral sensibility is no more relevant to the confirmation or disconfirmation of ethical claims than is mathobiology to the validity of mathematical proofs.

It is an objection Joyce has considered. In the form in which he poses it, he considers whether simple mathematical beliefs, such as that $1 + 1 = 2$, might be innate or something to which we are innately predisposed. In effect, he asks how the evolutionary story for that bit of mathematical competence could work if the belief were not true. Since he assumes, plausibly, that the evolutionary story could not work if the belief were not true, he thinks this marks a

difference from the evolutionary account of morality.¹⁷ “Can we make sense of its having been useful for our ancestors to form beliefs concerning *rightness* and *wrongness* independently of the existence of rightness and wrongness? Here I think the answer is a resounding ‘Quite possibly.’” (Joyce 2006, 183)

What Joyce overlooks is the fact that our mathematical competence, for which there presumably must be some evolutionary explanation or other, extends well beyond simple arithmetic that it would be important for our forebears to get right in the ancestral environment. It is hard, for example, to describe the kind of situation in the ancestral environment that might have required the mathematical competence to prove the Fundamental Theorem of Algebra. Nonetheless, that is no reason to doubt our mathematical competence, or that we can correctly reason about and construct proofs of claims that can be tested or verified only through further mathematical reasoning. Can we dismiss the possibility that our moral competence in the same way makes accessible to us a domain of (moral) facts, even if we reason about claims that can be tested or verified only through further moral reasoning? If we can or should dismiss the possibility in the case of moral reasoning, some explanation is needed why a parallel dismissal is not appropriate for complex mathematical reasoning.

This argument only begins to shift the burden of proof. The needed explanation *might* be forthcoming, but in its absence, we are at least justified in further considering the possibility that ethics is like mathematics in having its own internal standards of proof and discovery, and that it is also like mathematics in being none the worse for that.

We can go beyond this. My argument is not just that ethics *may* be in good order. Joyce’s fundamental concern is about the mysteries of practical clout. What is it, what *could* it be, that could integrate comfortably with a broadly naturalistic and scientific view of the world?

¹⁷ Joyce 2006, 182-183.

On one level, I am not sure how to answer. Perhaps, we can do no better, directly, than to acknowledge the unanswered question as an appropriate area for further investigation. However, *indirectly*, we can point out that there is something just as mysterious as practical clout that Joyce is not in a position to do without.

Consider epistemic normativity.¹⁸ We have reason to prefer hypotheses that are better supported by evidence, to search for the best theory, to assess argument by its cogency and so forth. Take a simple case: Anyone who accepts the premises of a valid argument ought to believe its conclusion. Or, of course, reject some premise, etc. But for our purposes, let's stick with the simpler formulation.¹⁹ Obviously, an epistemic 'ought' is being invoked. If we urge people to believe the conclusions of valid arguments, we are not *morally* criticizing failure to do so. Rather, those who reject conclusions validly drawn from premises they accept are failing to live up to appropriate epistemic standards.

Why are they bound by epistemic standards? Will we have to appeal to *epistemic clout*? The force of the principle that anyone who accepts the premises of a valid argument ought to believe its conclusion does not depend upon the desires, preferences or goals of the person whose epistemic performance is being assessed. It applies regardless of what she wants, including what she wants to believe. She cannot escape its force by wanting very much to believe something different or by having some important goal which believing differently better serves. And it is not just that the epistemic ought applies without regard to her goals, as norms of etiquette might. She ought to comply, and ought to care about compliance, whether she does or not. The epistemic ought is not only inescapable; it has authority.

¹⁸ Actually, I think the argument generalizes. Normativity, be it moral, epistemic, instrumental or prudential, faces the same general questions. If someone wants to dismiss one while keeping others, the burden of proof is to explain why the one rejected is different—why moral normativity, for example, is suspect in a way that the others are not.

¹⁹ This way of proceeding leads to a bit of inaccuracy which (a) could only be cleaned up with a *much* lengthier exposition, and (b) does not materially alter any of the argument or conclusions drawn.

In short, in parallel to practical clout, there is epistemic clout. And arguments similar to Joyce's can be brought against epistemic clout. What is it, what *could* epistemic clout be, that could integrate comfortably with a broadly naturalistic and scientific view of the world? Perhaps epistemic clout, too, is projected rather than discovered.

But this is a path down which Joyce cannot afford to go. In order to make his case about moral normativity, he needs to rely upon epistemic normativity. If we should accept his conclusions, that is because he has built a good case for them, has presented epistemically good reasons for acceptance. It must not be that we can also, *without rational fault*, reject an epistemically good case. Norms of reasoning, evidence-gathering and theory acceptance have epistemic clout.

This does not leave us with an answer to the mystery of practical clout. Rather, it points to another mystery equally difficult. The important point is that it appears that the two mysteries stand or fall together. If practical clout falls on account of its mysteriousness, so does epistemic clout. If epistemic clout stands, despite its mysteriousness, no adequate reason has been given why practical clout cannot also. Since Joyce must rely upon epistemic normativity, and therefore upon epistemic clout, to make his case, he must suppose that the mysteries of epistemic clout are not fatal. But then, it is not clear why the mysteries of practical clout *are* thought to be fatal. Certainly, something better needs to be done than pointing to its mysteriousness.

Again, this argument only aims to (further) shift the burden of proof. We can do more by looking at what I shall call the practical implications of Joyce's view. In order to make the issue clear, I must distinguish it from a concern which might go by the same name, but which Joyce rightly rejects. Some meet Joyce's moral skepticism with moral criticism. But as he responds:

[T]he moral skeptic can hardly be defeated by *moral* condemnation of her position. If one is inclined to reject moral skepticism, yet underlying one's motivation is a moral consideration, then the theory under scrutiny has something

to say about that consideration: that it is false or unjustified. Any theory that explains the presence of widespread error is, ipso facto, counterintuitive. Thus, that moral skepticism may seem to many obviously false and pernicious is exactly what the moral skeptic predicts, and therefore cannot be employed as a consideration against the view. (Joyce 2006, 223-224)

Joyce is quite right that moral criticism of his view is out of place, at least until and unless some other warrant can be given for the moral view in terms of which the criticism is framed. But that does not mean that we cannot consider the practical and rational consequences of accepting his view.

To recap briefly, Joyce's view is that we should be moral agnostics. We do not know either that there are or that there are not moral truths. Moreover, if there are moral truths, we do not know what they are. We really have no way to tell. The question I wish to pose is: will believing this make a difference to our actions and practices—including actions and practices bound up with moral assessment, such as praise, criticism, reward, punishment and so on? There are two general possibilities—that it will or that it will not.

Consider first the possibility that it will. This seems by far the more plausible. But how will that work? Presumably, in some such way as this:

A serious harm is about to be inflicted upon someone. We ask why and are informed that it is punishment for wrongdoing. We reflect that we are not confident either generally that there is any such thing as wrongdoing that deserves punishment or specifically that the case before us is such a case. Having reflected, we might or might not stop the harm from being inflicted, assuming it is in our power to do so, but surely we will be less likely to allow such things to occur.

On the surface, that seems straightforward. We doubt the punishment is deserved and so are less likely to impose it. Looking deeper, though, matters become very puzzling. For what could the reason be for being less likely to impose punishment except that we are supposing that causing

great harm needs to be justified, and, in the case at hand, has not been? That looks as though we are appealing—non-doubtfully—to a moral premise.

Other examples seem to yield to similar analysis. If we are more doubtful about some moral principles, we will be more hesitant about applying them, especially to the extent that large or serious consequences depend upon their application or non-application. But it does not seem possible to make sense of that reasoning without appeal to some non-doubtfully held moral premise. It seems that there is no place outside morality, external to an evaluative framework, from which to call it into question.²⁰

But if our moral skepticism is really as embracing as Joyce's argument indicates that it should be, how can we do that? So perhaps we should consider the possibility that accepting Joyce's agnosticism need not commit us to any changes in practice. That seems quite strange, but notice where it leads. It will mean that we can carry on with moral assessment, moral reasoning, moral discussion, and all the practices that we typically suppose are under-written by their moral legitimacy. We will even be able to encourage others to hold moral beliefs and hang onto them ourselves.²¹ Joyce will not be in a position to say that there is anything wrong with what we are doing. Though he is tempted to use moral rhetoric—"the only honest and dignified course is to acknowledge what the evidence and our best theorizing indicate and deal with the practical consequences" (2006, 229-230)—it is a rhetoric to which he is entitled only if he is wrong.

²⁰ For differing approaches to this point, see Blackburn 1996 and Dworkin 1996.

²¹ If epistemic clout is in question, too—and why wouldn't it be?—there will be no room for identifying any rational fault even in ignoring a strong case for moral skepticism.

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